Declassified and Approved For Release 2011/12/22 : CIA-RDP90-00965R000100120135-2

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE E-47

WASHINGTON POST
18 February 1985

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Reaction to KAL Downing Aided U.S.

When the Soviets shot down a Korean Air Lines 747 with 269 passengers and crew on Sept. 1, 1983, American embassies around the world immediately were ordered to report the reactions of foreign governments and press. The State Department wanted to know just how big a black eye the Soviets had given themselves.

Hundreds of recently declassified cables, reviewed by my associate Lucette Lagnado, show Foggy Bottom's keen interest in what was clearly regarded as a propaganda windfall for the United States. Here are some of the most significant results of the worldwide survey:

■ Washington was particularly interested in determining which, if any, communist countries would issue flat-out condemnations of the Soviet downing of the KAL plane. "Any notable—i.e., out of sync with Moscow—reactions . . . [would] be of interest, both to us and to our Korean friends," stated a cable sent out within days of the incident. The tally that resulted showed that only three communist governments—China, Yugoslavia and Romania—"actively denounced" the Soviets.

■ In this hemisphere, there were a couple of gratifying surprises. The leftist government of Nicaragua and the Marxist regime in Grenada "joined in the unanimous expressions of concern" by countries in the region. The Nicaraguans backed off a bit at a meeting of the Organization of American States, saying, "The facts are not yet in."

■ The State Department was especially interested in the reaction of Italy's communists, who were described as "paralyzed by the Soviet action."

"The incident and the delayed Soviet reaction caused considerable concern for communist officials," the cable stated, adding that some members of the party's youth group even joined a protest staged outside the Soviet embassy in Rome. "The communist party," the cable summarized, "has attempted throughout the episode to make clear that it had nothing to do with these Soviet actions and should not be blamed for them."

■ Washington was anxious to see whether the military regime in Poland would toe the line like most of Moscow's satellites. The Warsaw embassy reported that Poland generally was obedient.

"Polish media coverage of the KAL incident continues to be heavy and to follow the Moscow line," the embassy cabled. "Polish news agency continues to support the Soviet version of events with numerous . . . selective quotes from western news sources."

■ Among western noncommunist groups, only West Germany's Green Party took an openly anti-American position. It objected when the Bonn government announced plans for a boycott of flights in and out of the Soviet Union.

■ From Latin America, the cables were almost openly gloating. "Soviets took a black eye in Peru," the Lima embassy reported. "The Marxist left's attempts to explain away Moscow's brutality only augmented nation's revulsion and diminished credibility of those who . . . defend Soviet Union. This included communist deputies . . . . The United States has clearly advanced its position in this unstable country."

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